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C O N F I D E N T I A L FREETOWN 000344

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/25/2019

TAGS: EFIS PGOV PREL ECON SL

SUBJECT: U.S. COAST GUARD SEIZURE ENDS SIERRA LEONE
COMPLACENCY ON FISHERIES ENFORCEMENT

REF: FREETOWN 0079

Classified By: CDA Glenn Fedzer for reason 1.4 (B) and (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The Combined U.S. Coast Guard Cutter LEGARE-Sierra Leone seizure of a 750 ton Taiwanese-flagged fishing vessel August 17th ended Sierra Leonean complacency on Fisheries, and may cost a Minister her job. The seizure was initially met with considerable jubilation by both the Minister of Fisheries and Minister of Defense, but reported attempts by the Minister of Fisheries to impose a low-ball fine of \$40,000, and justify it to the Vice President with fraudulent information, may add her name to the list of Ministers President Koroma will dismiss in the next cabinet reshuffle. The Ambassador met with the Vice President August 21, and provided him with information from the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter LEGARE and other sources that varied considerably from what some Fisheries officials were reporting. The seizure itself was a major boost to already positive bilateral relations, demonstrating the value of the Maritime Assistance Agreement (signed only two months ago in June), and putting a million dollar asset into the hands of the Sierra Leonean government. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The seizure of the Taiwanese fishing boat Yu Feng 102 on August 17th, by Sierra Leonean officials embarked on the USCGC LEGARE at the very start of a one week combined patrol, was met with jubilation by senior leaders within the Sierra Leonean government. Minister of Defense Paolo Conteh and Minister of Fisheries and Marine Resources Afsatu Kabba both were effusive in their praise, with Kabba personally calling the Defense AttachQ to communicate her appreciation. Behind the scenes, however, the seizure may lead to Kabba's firing, when she was reportedly caught attempting to impose a small fine and release the ship after being offered a bribe by the owners. Kabba already has a spotty record on corruption connected with electricity contracts signed with a Nigerian company during her tenure as Minister of Energy (reftel).

¶3. (C) The Yu Feng was not licensed to fish in Sierra Leonean waters and had aboard 18 tons of Tuna, several tons of Shark, and 50 tons of bait fish when seized; rough estimates put the value of the catch at over several hundred thousand dollars. Ship's logs indicate that the Yu Feng also off-loaded 56 tons of Tuna in June, including Atlantic Big Eye, to a factory boat just outside Sierra Leone's EEZ. Unnamed Fisheries officials told their team embarked on the Legare, and evidently the Vice President, that the owner of the Yu Feng would be fined 40,000 dollars, after which the ship would be released. The Vice President (acting for President Koroma, away on a state visit to Brazil) reportedly suspected that Kabba was taking a bribe in exchange for imposing a trivial fine, and contacted the U.S. Embassy 20 August to request clarification; his intermediary reported that the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources was giving mixed and contradictory signals, and wanted a source they could trust on the value of the catch and Sierra Leone's legal options.

¶4. (C) Ambassador met with Vice President Samuel Samsumana at his request on the morning of 21 August; the VP thanked the USG for assisting in the seizure, and asked that further

ship visits and combined exercises be scheduled. He reiterated the importance of fisheries resources to the development of Sierra Leone. Ambassador delivered a letter on the seizure and value of the catch, and a copy of Sierra Leone's Maritime Law indicating Sierra Leone was within rights to seize the entire catch, the boat, and all of the equipment. The Deputy Foreign Minister later reported to the DCM that Samsumana contacted Minister Kabba with his concerns; and that shortly thereafter Kabba corrected the "error" by adding a zero, raising the initial fine to 400,000 dollars. President Koroma returned over the weekend, and directed instead that the maximum penalty, the forfeiture of the ship and catch to the Sierra Leonean government, be imposed. The Deputy Foreign Minister reported the value of the ship, equipment, and catch given the President was 1.5 million dollars. President Koroma followed this up with a general meeting at the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources, and issuing a official announcement critical of the Ministry's failure to accurately collect and account for Fisheries revenue (paragraph 6). Most press reports that followed speculated that Kabba would lose her job soon.

¶5. (C) Comment. The seizure was a policy home run for the Embassy and African Command. The vast difference between the potential value of the seizure and the small fine officially proposed by Kabba, made evident the need to better regulate fisheries--and the Ministry which imposes those regulations. Kabba has been a close friend of the President's, and may survive in some capacity, but was noticeably shaken during a reception on the Legare following the President's visit to her Ministry. President Koroma is restructuring the bureaucracy, reportedly by putting the Vice President in charge of the Joint Maritime Commission, the interagency group best positioned to exercise control over fisheries and coordinate competing ministers. A Koroma advisor opined that putting Samsumana in charge would satisfy the VP's desire for a higher public profile and overcome his reputation for corruption with donors if he exercises prudence in his oversight. The speed at which he blocked Kabba's attempt to let the Yu Feng slip away was a good initial start. The seizure boosted the bilateral relationship as well, bolstered cabinet members that supported the signing of the Maritime Assistance Agreement; just two months earlier. Though insufficient to derail the Agreement, Embassy sources reported some internal opposition to deeper military engagement with the United States; the seizure demonstrated in a concrete, 1.5 million dollar way, the value such engagement can offer to Sierra Leone.

6: (U) Full Text of the President's Remarks Follow:
In an impromptu 'routine' visit to the Brookfields offices of the Ministry of Marine Resources & Fisheries, President Koroma today told officials, including Minister Afsatu Kabba and Deputy Minister Oya Sankoh, that he is not happy with the activities in the ministry: "Let me start by saying I am not happy with what is happening here. This ministry is one of our growth sectors. In addition to food security through which we can derive much-needed protein, it should also substantially supply much-expected revenue to government."

Speaking at the ministry's conference hall to all officials present, the President recalled that in preparing the budget, the projections made by the minister at the time were thought to be adequate and challenging. "But from details available, even the revenue projection was grossly inadequate," the President charged. "And I believe it has been projected in that manner so that you can limit our activities...We have been following your activities, and both government and the nation are losing a whole lot because of inefficient activities in this ministry. We stand condemned as a nation that we have everything to sustain a nation, including marine, yet we are a poor nation, yet we still depend on donors. We cannot continue like this."

In a very serious tone, the President said it all borders on corruption, especially the connivance of officials with unscrupulous people to defraud the nation through the issuance or lack of it of licenses, royalties, and health

certificates. In practical terms, the President said, even though the ministry had made a projection of a revenue collection of 4.5 billion Leones, yet he discovered that about half of this money was raised within two months, scolding directors for not taking up the responsibility to question the anomaly regarding the shortfall in the subsequent months. It was further discovered that there were discrepancies with regards the number of fishing companies and vessels registered to send reports of their activities. "What we have here is a show of inefficiency," the President declared, noting that there were unregistered companies doing business without any action taken by the ministry. "Yet we expect donors to help us build a shipping harbour when we cannot even control the little things. We are sitting on a gold mine as a ministry, yet we are waiting to be told that we are losing money.....You sit here pretending that you are under-paid, yet you are tightening up the revenue base of government...It is an embarrassment for Sierra Leone to be moving cap in hand begging for funds when we are so endowed with natural resources...When I talk of a change of attitudes, this is what I mean." He said if only the ministry officials would work efficiently with the Navy, then they would bring in enough income to raise the revenue base.

However, the President said the present status quo is unacceptable. He said he has no intention to stifle the business community, "but they must work within the ambit of the law." "Everybody talks about Sierra Leone's wealth, but we are wallowing in squalor," he lamented. He said if the Marine Resources Ministry were efficient, it would raise the projected 4.5 billion Leones within a month.

Issuing a very stern warning, the President said, "This must stop. This must stop in this ministry. I'll ensure we monitor the activities of this ministry more closely...the country must go on. No one can hold this country to ransom. We should be in charge of our destiny. But for us to perform that role, you must do your work or you quit. If you don't quit and you don't do your work, we'll ask you to quit. Because, nobody will stop this country from realizing her potential." He declared that all those who have fallen foul and are caught will face the full penalty of the law. "We have had enough of this and it's time for this nation to benefit from her God-given resources...If you don't turn to a new page, be prepared for the consequences," the Head of State concluded. Earlier, the President made a tour of offices in the ministry questioning officials on a one-on-one basis after having a closed-door meeting with the Minister, the Deputy Minister, and the Director of Fisheries Mohamed Faud Sheriff.

The President was accompanied by the Minister of Presidential & Public Affairs Joseph Koroma.

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